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# HEBREW POETRY.

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At the request of Prof. W. R. Harper I propose to give a series of articles upon Hebrew Poetry, in order to set forth the doctrine of its structure. Those who desire information with regard to the history of the discussions on this subject will find it briefly set forth in my *Biblical Study* (pp. 255 seq.). It is sufficient to state here that the statements of Josephus, Eusebius and Jerome that Hebrew Poetry is composed of hexameters, pentameters and trimeters are essentially correct. But we must banish from our minds any measurement of the feet such as we find in Greek, Latin and Arabic poetry. Moreover, we cannot agree with Dr. Bickell that Hebrew poetry is measured by syllables, without regard to quantity, as in Syriac poetry, so that there is a constant succession of accented and unaccented syllables, and hence either iambic or trochaic feet. Hebrew poetry is at a still earlier stage of development than Syriac poetry. It does not count the syllables or measure the feet; but it counts the words and measures by the beats of the accent.

The Măqqēph is used in the Massoretic system as a guide to cantillation. It is frequently placed where the rhythm requires it. But cantillation is very different from the proper rendering of poetry. It is necessary, therefore, to disregard the Massoretic Măqqēphs. However, the use of the Măqqēph for cantillation rests upon an older use for the rhythm. The Măqqēphs must be inserted, therefore, wherever the rhythm requires it, for this is a device whereby two or more words are combined under one rhythmical accent.

## I. THE HEBREW TRIMETER.

The simplest and earliest form of Hebrew verse is the trimeter, measured by three rhythmical accents. There are dimeter lines, but there is no piece of poetry in the Hebrew Bible that is constructed of dimeters. They are used merely to give variation to the trimeters, especially at the beginning or close of a strophe, or where it is important that there should be a pause in the movement of the thought or emotion.

The Book of Numbers has preserved for us several pieces of poetry that are ascribed to Balaam. These all have the trimeter movement. We shall use them as illustrations, and from them, by induction, describe the several kinds of parallelism.

מִן-אֲרָם יִנְחֵנִי בֶלֶק  
מֶלֶךְ-מוֹאב מֵהָרִרִי קָדָם

לכה ארה-לי יעקב  
 ולכה זעמה ישראל  
 מה-אקב לא-קבה אל  
 ומה-אזעם לא-זעם יהוה  
 כי-מראש צרים אראנו  
 ומן גבעות אשורנו  
 הן-עם לברר ישכן  
 ובגוים לא יתחשב  
 מי-מנה עפר יעקב  
 ומי-ספר את-רבע ישראל  
 תמת נפשי מות-ישרים  
 ותהי אחריתי כמהו

Numbers xxiii., 7-10.

Every line has the three rhythmical accents except the eighth, which is a dimeter. Such lines frequently occur in the trimeters. They were often designed by the poet; but there are instances in which we may doubt whether the Massoretic text has preserved the original line of the poem. There are also examples where the secondary accent of a long word has the power of a rhythmical accent. It is our opinion that line 8 of our poem, in its original form, read—

ומן גבעות אשורנו

There is no consistency of usage in the Massoretic text in the use of the preposition **מן**. Sometimes it is separable and at other times inseparable, and again it is separable and combined by a *Măqqēph*. Mistakes of copyists were so easy here that we cannot be sure, in many cases, in which way the original text existed. And in the lines of poetry, where there is no clear reason for departing from the rhythm, the prepositions should be separable or inseparable, as the rhythm requires. In this piece we have removed one Massoretic [*Măqqēph*] in line 2, where it combines two words of four syllables under one accent and reduces the line to a dimeter. We have inserted the *Măqqēph* in four cases, in no instance making more than three syllables. We have corrected the text of line 12 after Orelli, in accordance with the parallelism, so as to read **מי ספר** instead of **מספר**. We translate this piece into English prose, preserving the parallelisms:—

1. From Aram Balaq brings me,
2. The King of Moab from the mountains of the East;
3. "O come, curse for me Jacob,
4. And O come, execrate Israel."
5. How can I denounce whom 'El doth not denounce?
6. Or how can I execrate what Jahveh doth not execrate?
7. For from the top of the rocks I see him,
8. And from the hills I spy him.
9. Lo, a people alone, he dwelleth,

10. And he reckons himself not among the nations.
11. Who hath numbered the dust of Jacob ?
12. Or who hath counted the fourth of Israel ?
13. Let me, myself, die the death of the upright,
14. And let my last end be like his.—(Num. XXIII., 7-10.)

There are several fine specimens of parallelism in this piece. Lines 5 and 6 give us a complete synonymous distich in which the three terms are synonymous with each other, "denounce" with "execrate," twice, and "'El" with "Jahveh." Lines 11 and 12 are synonymous in two terms, "counted" with "numbered," and "Israel" with "Jacob," but there is a progress in the third term from "dust" to "fourth part." Lines 1 and 2 are synonymous in "King of Moab" with "Balaq" and "mountains of the East" with "Aram," but the third term of line 1 does not appear in line 2; it is implied, however. Lines 3 and 4 give the second and third terms as synonymous, but the first term is identical. Lines 9 and 10 are synonymous in thought, but there is no close correspondence of the terms. Lines 13 and 14 give the synonymous parallels in the single term "last end" and "death," but in other respects the thought is synonymous without exact correspondence of terms. Thus this poem is composed of seven couplets all synonymous and yet varying, so that sometimes the correspondence is in a single term, and then it extends to two or three terms, and then again it is general and without correspondence of any one term with its mate.

The second poem of Balaam (Num. XXIII., 18-24) has the same trimeter movement, but it extends to twenty-two lines. There is but one short line (l. 20). But this may be explained in the same way as in the previous poem, by making the preposition separable (cf. Exod. xv., 5). We remove the *Māqqēphs* in three instances and insert them in four cases:—

1. Rise up, Balaq, and hear thou,
2. O give ear unto me, son of Zippor.
3. 'El is no man that he should lie,
4. Neither a son of mankind that he should be sorry.
5. Hath he said and will he not do it ?
6. Or hath he spoken and will he not establish it ?
7. Lo, to bless I have received (commandment);
8. And if he bless I cannot reverse it.
9. He doth not behold trouble in Jacob,
10. And he doth not see misery in Israel.
11. Jahveh his God is with him,
12. And the shout of a king is in him.
13. 'El has been bringing him out of Egypt,
14. As the swiftness of the yore-ox has he.
15. For there is no magic in Jacob,

16. And no divination in Israel ;
17. At the due time it will be said of Jacob,
18. And of Israel, what hath 'El wrought !
19. Behold, the people rises up as a lioness,
20. And as a lion lifts himself up :
21. He will not lie down until he devour prey
22. And drink the blood of the slain.—(Num. xxiii., 18–24.)

There is synonymous parallelism of three terms in lines 5 and 6, 9 and 10, 15 and 16; of two terms in lines 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 19 and 20, 21 and 22; of one term in lines 7 and 8, and 11 and 12. There are several distichs that present new features. Lines 13 and 14 give progressive parallelism, in that line 14 is a complement of 13. "'El has been bringing him out of Egypt," and in this bringing up he is like the gigantic ox of ancient times. The progression here is in the form of a simile. Lines 17 and 18 give a specimen of the marching parallelism. The R.V. mistakes it by attaching "of Israel" to the previous line, destroying the rhythm of both lines and the parallelism at the same time. The first member of line 18 is synonymous with the last member of line 17, and from this as a base the line advances to the climax "What hath 'El wrought!" Lines 7 and 8 give a specimen of mixed parallelism. There is the identical term "bless" which serves to emphasize the antithetical parallelism in the single term "reverse" with "received."

The third poem of Balaam (Num. xxiv., 3–9) has exactly the same structure and length as the second poem. We remove two Mäqqēphs and insert three. We amend the text by omitting the relative pronoun of line 4, as a prosaic addition to the text. It is not common to use the relative pronoun in Hebrew poetry. No poet would destroy his rhythm by using it where it is unnecessary. We change the Massoretic accents of verses 6 and 7 so as to read—

משכנתך | ישראל | כנחלים  
נשיו | כננות | עלי-נהר

The text of verse 8 is corrupt and the versions differ in their renderings. The Massoretic חץ = arrow, is against the context, which refers to the yore-ox and the lion, and the use of arrows is inappropriate to these animals. It seems to us that the original reading of line 18 was

ועצמתיהם | יגרם | ומחץ

The Massoretic יחצין יחצין has arisen by a mistake in rewriting the end letters ח and צ. There are three dimeter lines, e. g., 14, 21 and 22, where the variation seems to be intentional.

1. The oracle of Balaam, son of Beor ;
2. Yea, the oracle of the man with closed eyes,
3. The oracle of one hearing the sayings of 'El,
4. Who beholds the vision of Shadday

5. Fallen down and with eyes uncovered.
6. How excellent are thy tents, Jacob,
7. Thy tabernacles, Israel, as vales,
8. Spread forth as gardens by a river,
9. As lign-aloes which Jahveh planted,
10. As cedars beside waters.
11. May water flow from his buckets,
12. And his seed be on many waters,
13. And may his king be higher than Agag,
14. And may his kingdom exalt itself,
15. 'El has been bringing him forth from Egypt,
16. Yea, as the swiftness of the yore-ox has he.
17. He eateth up the nations his adversaries,
18. And their bones gnaweth and crusheth,
19. He doth couch, doth lie down as the lion,
- [ 20. And as a lioness; who would stir him up?
21. Blessed be those blessing thee,
22. And cursed be those cursing thee.

This poem gives additional features of parallelism. The poem opens with a pentastich describing the condition of the prophet under the influence of the prophetic mania. The first three lines begin with an identical term, "oracle." The second line has its second term synonymous with the second term of the first line, but its third term is a new idea, "with closed eyes." The third line has its second term synonymous, but its third term is new, "sayings of 'El." The fourth line gives three terms which are synonymous with the second and third terms of the previous line. The fifth line is progressive to the fourth, presenting a new thought in the climax of the pentastich.

We then have a second pentastich. Lines 6 and 7 have two terms in synonymous parallelism, but the third term of line 7 is progressive in the simile "as vales." This is followed by three other similes in steady synthesis of the lines.

We have next two tetrastichs, the first composed of two synonymous couplets. The second begins with a tetrastich in which Israel is compared with a yore-ox. Line 16 is progressive to line 15. Lines 17 and 18 are synonymous, save that the object is emphasized in line 17, "nations, his adversaries;" but the verb is emphasized in line 18, "gnaweth and crusheth." We next have a distich which is synonymous in the terms "lion" with "lioness," in order to the strong antithesis of "doth couch, doth lie down" with "who will stir him up?" The poem closes with an antithetical distich.

The fourth poem of Balaam is composed of a longer piece and several short ones (Num. xxiv., 15-24). The larger poem is composed of sixteen lines describing the subjugation of Moab and Edom to Israel. The oracle against the Ama-

lekites is a distich, and those against the Kenites and Assyria, tetrastichs. We remove one Mäqqēph and insert five. We change the text by transferring "his enemies" to line 16. It is a plural and inappropriate, where it is, both to the structure of the line and the sense. It is, moreover, needed in line 16 to supply the verb with an object and complete the line. Furthermore, the line to which it is attached is a repetition of the previous line, with the single exception of the use of Seir for Edom, and it should be stricken out. We also change the meaningless מעיר into שער in line 17. There is but one dimeter in this poem and it is where we would expect it, at the beginning of the oracle against the Kenites.

1. Oracle of Balaam, son of Beor,
2. Yea, oracle of the man with closed eyes,
3. Oracle of one hearing the sayings of 'El,
4. And of one knowing the knowledge of 'Elyon,
5. Who beholds the vision of Shadday,
6. Fallen down and with eyes open.
7. I see it, but it is not now ;
8. I observe it, but it is not near ;
9. A star doth advance out of Jacob,
10. Yea, a sceptre doth arise out of Israel,
11. And it doth smite through the corners of Moab,
12. And it doth break down all the sons of tumult.
13. And Edom has become a possession.
14. Yea, Israel is a doer of valient deeds,
15. Yea, let one out of Jacob have dominion over his enemies
16. And destroy the remnant of Seir.

The parallelisms of this piece present few additional features. The poem opens with a hexastich. It differs from the first pentastich of the previous poem only by the insertion of an additional line (l. 4) which is entirely synonymous with the previous line. This hexastich is followed by another hexastich which is composed of three synonymous couplets. These three couplets are completely synonymous within themselves, but are each progressive to its predecessor. The poem concludes with a tetrastich of introverted parallelism, that is, the last line of the four is in synonymous parallelism with the first line. The middle lines are also in synonymous parallelism, save that the third line has an additional term defining more closely the dominion.

The oracle against Amalek is an antithetical distich :

First of the nations was Amalek,  
But his last end (extends) unto one ready to perish.

The oracle against the Kenites is a tetrastich composed of antithetical couplets :

Strong is thy dwelling-place,  
 And set in the rock thy nest :  
 Nevertheless Kain will be for wasting ;  
 How long ere Asshur carry thee away captive ?  
 The oracle against Asshur is a progressive tetrastich :  
 Alas, who can live when 'El establishes it ?  
 But ships will come from the coast of Kittim,  
 And afflict Asshur and afflict Eber,  
 But he also shall go on unto one ready to perish.

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These four poems of Balaam illustrate the regular flow of the trimeter movement in Hebrew poetry and the great variety of parallelisms. I give a reproduction of the Hebrew trimeter in English poetry by my pupil George H. Gilbert, Ph. D., who has succeeded in reproducing the sublime Poem of Job in English poetry of the same movement.

If I with falsehood have walked,  
 And my foot hastened after deceit—  
 Let Him weigh me in righteous scales,  
 That Eloah my virtue may know !  
 If my step turned aside from the way,  
 And my heart followed after my eyes,  
 And a blemish did cleave in my palm :  
 Let me sow, and another one eat,  
 And my shoots, let them be rooted up.—(XXXI., 5-8.)  
 If gold I have made my support,  
 And to fine gold have said, O my trust !  
 If I joyed that my wealth was great,  
 And my hand had acquired much goods ;  
 If I saw the light when it shone,  
 And the moon in majesty moving ;  
 If my heart became foolish in secret,  
 And my hand did cleave to my mouth :  
 This, too, were a crime for the judges,  
 For to God above I had lied.—(XXXI., 24-28.)

In our next article we propose to present some specimens of the strophical organization of the trimeters and also examples of the use of rhyme, assonance and alliteration.